

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: December 11, 13, 14, 2006,
Catahoula Lake: December 15, 2006
Scaup Survey: December 11, 2006

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Estimates made from Aircraft (*) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	75,000	8,000	29,000	112,000
MOTTLED	44,000	26,000		70,000
GADWALL	647,000	337,000	18,000	1,002,000
WIGEON	14,000	46,000	3,000	63,000
GW TEAL	347,000	42,000		389,000
BW TEAL	276,000	29,000		305,000
SHOVELER	220,000	18,000		238,000
PINTAIL	44,000	65,000	50,000	159,000
TOTAL DABLERS	1,667,000	571,000	100,000	2,338,000
SCAUP	11,000	15,000		26,000
RINGNECKED	53,000	338,000	57,000	448,000
CANVASBACK	6,000	1,000	49,000	56,000
TOTAL DIVERS	70,000	354,000	106,000	530,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,737,000	925,000	206,000	2,868,000
COOTS	439,000	852,000		1,291,000

COMMENTS:

Due to logistical problems and a week of persistent fog, we were unable to complete all portions of the December survey. Except for Catahoula Lake, none of the surveyed areas in northeast or northwest Louisiana could be flown prior to re-opening waterfowl hunting season. Along the coast, line 27 through the deltaic marsh habitat near the mouth of the Mississippi River could not be done because of continuous fog cover. The

average by species for the past 5 years on line 27 was used to generate the estimate for southeast Louisiana in the table above.

The estimate of 2.87 million ducks on this survey is 24% higher than last month's estimate of 2.3 million, 10% higher than the estimate for December 2005, and is the highest since 3 million ducks were estimated in December, 2000. This estimate is higher than the 5-year average of 2 million and is comparable to the long-term December average of 2.9 million. All species increased over the past month except gadwalls and shovelers, with about half the species below long-term average (mallards, wigeon, green-winged teal, pintails, and scaup) and the others above long-term average. Notably, the estimate for blue-winged teal is nearly 3 times the December long-term average while the estimate for mallards is only one-third the long-term average for the month. Estimates of almost all species were higher in the southwest marshes than the southeast, which is similar to the November survey but opposite of the distribution seen last December. This is likely a result of differing vegetation recovery patterns of the 2 regions from hurricane impacts over the past year.

In December, LDWF also conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne. An estimated 3,000 scaup were seen on Lake Borgne and 1,195,000 were estimated on Lake Pontchartrain. This is a tremendous increase over last December's post-Katrina estimate of 1,000 scaup on the 2 lakes combined, and is over twice the highest number of scaup ever estimated on this survey since it began in 1978 (459,000 in 1981).

Weather conditions along the Mississippi Flyway have been such that a strong migration into southern states would be predicted. Numerous arctic cold fronts caused frozen wetland habitats and accumulations of snow as far south as southern Missouri. The coldest temperatures since January, 2003 were recorded in south Louisiana on December 8th during a week where average temperatures statewide were 12 degrees below normal. However, this was followed by a week with average temperatures 19 degrees warmer and 8 degrees above normal. Those conditions coincided with the split of our waterfowl season and were anticipated to allow new migrants to find abundant undisturbed habitats.

Habitat conditions have been affected by abnormally cold temperature and lower than average rainfall since the flooding rains of late October. Water levels along the coast have dropped markedly to the point where more water is needed to improve available habitat in certain locations. Some of the shallow flooded agricultural lands across the state in November are now dry or mud-flats, but active pumping of crawfish ponds and other managed habitat has compensated somewhat for that loss. In general, the reduced water levels in the marsh have likely improved habitat quality over the flooded conditions that existed last month. That is certainly true at Catahoula Lake, where water levels have receded to near management targets. As a result, nearly half the 206,000 ducks counted on the lake this month were dabblers, where all but 1,000 of the 113,000 ducks on the lake in November were diving ducks. Unfortunately, we have no comparable assessment of habitat conditions in northeast or northwest Louisiana.